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Macedonia, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Rwanda: Will Honduras Be Next?

By Susan M. Smith, Melanie N. Smith, and Matthew R. Smith

Thirteen years ago, God laid on my heart that I needed to go on a mission trip. I didn't know where. I didn't know when. But I felt led to step up and go. Our church had just sent a group to Morocco and I remember thinking that the next medical mission trip our church organized, I would go. What I need to tell you is that up to that point, our church had never organized a medical

faith increased so much during that trip as did my heart for missions.

You might be surprised to learn that the last foreign mission trip that I went on (medical or otherwise) was that trip to Macedonia in 2005. The other members of my family, however, have been on 11 mission experiences collectively since that time! My husband Rob has been to



mission trip. So, my brave ultimatum that I would go on the next medical mission trip was merely false bravado.

But God! In His infinite wisdom, He had been working on the hearts of a dental hygienist in our congregation and a Macedonian missionary with connections to our church so that two weeks after I committed in my heart I would go on the next medical mission trip, a medical mission trip to Macedonia was announced! Only God! Four months later I found myself headed to Macedonia where we worked with the missionary and local schools to share handwashing and dental hygiene techniques. We also worked with a Macedonian physician at a house-turned-clinic for a day to dispense medications to the hundred plus people who came for medical treatment. My

Haiti twice, our daughter Melanie has been to Haiti, the Dominican Republic (DR), and Rwanda for a total of 5 trips (the first when she was 16), and our son Matthew has also been to Haiti and the DR 4 times with his first trip at age 14. When I left for Macedonia, the hardest part of that trip was leaving my family. Melanie and Matthew were 9 and 7 years old at the time. Little did I know that it would be so much harder to stay behind and watch my kids go instead!

In 2013, Rob, Melanie, and Matthew went to Haiti on a youth mission trip. My kids were both in the youth group at the time, and Rob was asked to go perhaps because of his protective-like intimidating stature (really!!). Even though Rob had been to Haiti in 2011 and Melanie had gone in 2012, this was the hardest trip for me to send them...



because it was my entire nuclear family getting on that plane! I leaned on God so much during their time away, and this became a turning point in my outlook, attitude, and faith about foreign missions. It's hard, but it's also exciting to know that my children are being obedient to God's command to "Go!" and are seeing lives changed firsthand. I am reminded constantly that God has given me the wonderful privilege of raising them; but ultimately they belong to Him, and our sole purpose on this planet is to bring glory to Him.

Melanie and Matthew returned from their most recent trip to the Dominican Republic on July 28, 2018. It was the first time in 5 years they were able to go on a mission trip together. It was also the 4th year in a row that our church partnered with Time Ministries in the DR to build a church in a week. Our church has made great friendships and deep inroads not only with Time Ministries, but also with the Dominican people. My children have had the opportunity to be a part of this growing relationship as Matthew went in 2015 and 2016, and Melanie went in 2017. Last year, it was especially touching to learn that one of the Dominican interns with Time Ministries who became friends with Matthew the previous two summers was so excited to meet Matthew's sister Melanie. It was even more special to learn that this year he took a week off from his new job, just so he could spend time with the people of our church to continue building relationships!

Another opportunity for building relationships came last year when several of our church members had a chance to meet the children they sponsor through

Compassion International. Melanie was blessed to meet the two children our family sponsors: Melani and Yojanser. Before leaving for the DR this year, Melanie created photo albums that included pictures of our family. When she arrived in the DR, she shared the albums with Melani and Yojanser, and of course gave an album to each child for them to keep. It was especially sweet to me that Melani and Yojanser remembered Melanie... they were happy to see her again this year, and were excited to meet Matthew, too.

I wanted Melanie and Matthew to share from their hearts a bit about their recent mission experiences. Melanie's story centers around her time in Rwanda in March 2018, while Matthew's story is focused on his time in the DR in July 2018. To give you more insight into what each of them is currently doing, I'll lead into their stories with a mini bio about each of them. Melanie graduated from Liberty University this past May with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Bachelor's degree in Child/Family Development. She plans to pursue a doctoral degree in occupational therapy (I'm hopeful we will have an opportunity for interprofessional collaboration in the future!). Matthew is a junior at Liberty University, and is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice.

Melanie in Rwanda, March 2018

Before I went to Rwanda, I knew very little about the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 apart from its existence. It is rarely a story that makes it into history books, but it is one worth sharing as it is an incredible story of redemption and reconciliation. In Rwanda I learned the gruesome and horrific details of how the Hutus annihilated the Tutsis in the most barbaric of ways. In a mere 100 days, over one million Tutsis and Hutus who failed to comply were murdered by machete, gun, grenade, and any other means that would get the job done. The horror that swept across the nation for those 3 months was difficult to fathom especially as I stood in a country that was now filled with such joy just 24 years after this atrocity.

While in Rwanda I had the privilege

of hearing testimonies from many survivors of the genocide. They shared how nearly all of their family members were killed in front of them, how they hid for months afraid to make a sound, and how their neighbors and friends were the very ones to betray them. These survivors endured the unimaginable, but rather than standing in sorrow and anger, they chose to forgive. In one particular village we termed the "Reconciliation Village," perpetrators of the genocide lived among the survivors. I watched as a man who had killed a woman's entire family stood hand in hand with her. There has been undeniable forgiveness by the survivors and genuine repentance from the perpetrators as the two now live in community.

Elsewhere in Rwanda I saw the ramifications of the genocide still very much present as I toured a psychiatric hospital. Many patients suffered from severe PTSD as well as anxiety and depression. However, even here I saw the healing that was taking place. Through medications and counseling, these individuals were on the road to restoration.

Another place that felt the heavy weight of the genocide was in the "Widows' Village." These beautiful ladies were left widowed and desperate following the genocide. Several of them had severe scars from machete blows as well as deep emotional scars. I sat with a lady in her home as she shared her story with me. She explained how she contracted HIV after being raped by an infected man during the genocide. This was yet another tactic that was commonly used to cruelly kill and weaken the Tutsi tribe during the genocide. Despite the trauma these women endured, they exuded joy and gratitude in a way I have never seen before. They have full assurance in their future through their faith in Jesus Christ.

Throughout my 10 days in Rwanda, I learned about some heavy topics. I was angry that humanity could be so deplorable, and my heart ached for all of the survivors who lost loved ones.

However, I will never forget the scene of pure beauty that encompasses the nation of Rwanda. My team members and I continually said that Rwanda is a depiction of the gospel as its road from betrayal to redemption mirrors humanity's relationship with Jesus. What man meant for evil, the Lord restored into an extraordinary story of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Every Rwandan we met asked us to share the truth of their story with America, and I believe that in doing so we can all learn something from their experience of how tragedy was transformed into testimony.

Matthew in The Dominican Republic, July 2018

Prior to my trip to the Dominican Republic, I was given the task of preparing a sermon that I would present to a group of young adults in the local Dominican community. As I began my preparation, I discovered that it was very challenging for me to overcome the language and cultural barriers between my suburban life in Charlotte, NC and my audience's city life in Santo Domingo. While trying to accurately communicate the ideas found in 1 Timothy 4:12 provided its own challenge, interweaving personal experience and analogies that would be understood proved to be even more difficult. I found that even before embarking on my short-term mission trip, I was already laboring for those I would meet in the DR.

Once in the DR, I continued to encounter challenges regarding my sermon, because it was unknown who my translator would be, and we had to hope that there was even one available to deliver my message with me. Only minutes before I would be giving my message, we found someone willing and able to translate for me. I delivered my message, and the team I was traveling with helped lead the youth service as we had planned, making minor adjustments along the way. After a long and stressful day that consisted of a lot of panic and chaos, one Dominican girl gave her life to Christ that night. As I reflected on all the work that was put into making the youth service meaningful, and the labor I endured in trying to

create a coherent sermon, I realized that the work was more than worth it. I was a witness to the fact that sometimes in order to see someone's life be altered in a magnificent way, it requires many people working hard behind the scenes and putting in their time to help influence someone else's heart and mind. I was reminded of 1 Corinthians 15:58 ESV, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." I knew that my labor was not in vain and that this one girl's life was forever changed because God was willing to use my service to bring Himself the Glory.

I've read their stories multiple times and I still get tears in my eyes!

So what's next? It's pretty much a given in our family that one child or the other - or both - will be preparing for a short-term mission trip next summer. But what's next for me? A few days before the team left for the DR this July, I had lunch with the mother of one of the high school seniors who was going on the trip. She expressed how nervous she and her husband were for him to be going as this was his first foreign mission trip. As I prayed for God to remove their fear, it hit me that I truly had such a deep sense of peace about my kids going. I no longer had the 'oh no, God, why have you given them a heart for missions?' mindset. That's obviously not to say I don't worry, because of course I do. But as they've traveled to Central America for the last 6 years, I have found that my dependence on God for this area of my life has truly deepened. I had a conversation with Matthew the day after they returned from the DR about what motivates people to go - or not to go - on foreign mission trips. He shared with me that during the interest meeting held last fall about this July trip, someone asked if the trip would be safe, and specifically whether there would be bodyguards surrounding our team as they ministered to the people there. The team leaders explained that, no, there would be no bodyguards. Matthew said that he could see this person basically 'check out' of the meeting, and as you might have guessed, was not one of the 32 team members who went on this trip. As Matthew reminded

me that God never promises that we'll always be safe when we set about to do His work, I shared with him that while I know that in my head, it's another matter to have that assurance in my heart. It's taken me 6 years to 'let go and let God'. If I'm honest, I wouldn't say I'm totally 'there' yet. But God keeps working on me!

So back to my question...what's next for me? For the past few summers, I would say it was finances that kept me from volunteering for a mission trip. But considering my kids have received almost all of their funding from family, friends, and church members, I really can't use money as an excuse for me not going on my next trip. Is the excuse not having enough time? Of course that's always a factor, but not an insurmountable obstacle. I finally owned up to the fact that there really are no valid barriers preventing me from going. Over the past year, I've met with several other faculty members at my institution to develop and sustain a medical mission opportunity that involves precepting 4th year pharmacy students for a week in a foreign country. I would ask that you pray for me to have boldness as I remain obedient to God by pursuing this precepting/medical mission opportunity. At this point in time - God willing - I will be in Honduras in February 2020 on a medical mission trip! I look forward to that opportunity, and to sharing another mission trip experience with you. In the meantime, I can't wait to hear about yours!



Dr. Susan Smith completed her Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy degree at Ohio Northern University in May 1990 and a Doctor of Pharmacy degree from the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) in May 1992. Following her graduation, Dr. Smith completed a post graduate specialty residency in Adult Internal Medicine at MUSC in Charleston, South Carolina. Dr. Smith practiced as a Clinical Pharmacy

Specialist in Internal Medicine at MUSC and Novant Health Presbyterian Medical Center in Charlotte, North Carolina before transitioning to her current role in academia at Wingate University in Wingate, North Carolina, where she is an Assistant Professor of Pharmacy, teaching pharmacology to Physician Assistant students. Her areas of interest include experiential education, anticoagulation, and medication/patient safety.



Melanie Smith completed her Bachelor of Science in Psychology and her Bachelor of Science in Family and Child Development in May 2018 from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. She plans to pursue a post graduate doctoral degree in Occupational Therapy at Wingate University, beginning Fall 2019. Melanie is an active member of her local church, serving as a small group leader in the student ministry and on the production team. She enjoys traveling and seeing the world and its different cultures. Melanie has been to eight countries and hopes to continue traveling in the future.



Matthew Smith is a junior pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice and a minor in Global Studies at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He currently serves as a Resident Shepherd in his residence hall by nurturing spiritual development and maturity through elevating the priority of gospel-centered discipleship. He is an active member of his local church, serving on the production staff and with the youth. Matthew enjoys all types of sports, rock-climbing, and hiking.

Getting Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: My Journey to Tanzania

By Susie Kim

I believe that all children of God are blessed with unique gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit. He planned and formed throughout creation how he would use these spiritual gifts in us to shine light upon this dark and chaotic world, and to lift and magnify His kingdom.

The Apostle Peter describes the two general categories of spiritual gifts that we may receive upon our conversion: speaking gifts and serving gifts. *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen”* (1 Peter 4:10-11 NIV). I believe that God has blessed me with both gift categories: a gift of speaking (manifested through worship) and a gift of serving (manifested through missions). Through these gifts, God has cultivated



my spiritual growth, producing the fruit of the Spirit and blessing others around me. Using my spiritual gifts makes me feel fully alive in Christ, and this is my story of God’s provision and omnipotence in my life.

I have been attending All Nations Church for six years, and for five of those years I have been serving the Lord on mission trips to the Navajo Reservation to spread God’s love through genuine acts of kindness and compassion. I always loved seeing how God used His children to fill the empty void in the hearts of the Navajo Indians, but this year I felt compelled to quench my burning desire for something more. I prompted a conversation with our English ministry pastor about my calling and my hope for our ministry to go outside our comfort zone by going on an international mission trip. I prayed for months and I felt that God was laying Uganda on my heart. I had a plan, a purpose, and all the necessary information to convince our pastor to consider this location. Without giving it much thought, he said, “Maybe next time” and brushed off my proposal. At first I felt discouraged, but God was already working everything out behind the scenes. About two months